

TITLE: John Honeyman: The Silent Patriot

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*"Are spies nice people, dad?"*

## JOHN HONEYMAN: THE SILENT PATRIOT

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My youngest son is normally excited and talkative during the long drive to his little league basketball game. This time, however, he was unusually quiet and pensive. It was an important championship match and I assumed he was nervous. All kids are nervous before the big game, right? As we drove along Route 123, I searched my mind for a calming and inspirational phrase. I wondered what John Thompson would say to his Hoyas at a time like this.

"Dad?"

Here it is, I thought. This is what dads are for. He needs my vote of confidence. I worked the answer over in my mind. "It's only important that you give it your best shot. I'll always be proud of you even if you don't score any points." It sounded good.

*"Are spies nice people, dad?"*

It took a moment to sink in. Had I somehow blown my cover to an 11-year-old kid? Had he remembered the time years ago when my car was down and my wife had to pick me up at the front entrance? I wasn't ready to give him a full briefing on what I really did. I had pictured another time and place, a long walk in the autumn woods with him as a teenager while I, throwing pine cones at chipmunks, explained that I was [redacted] (b)(1) [redacted] a CIA officer. [redacted] (b)(3)(n)

"Well, it depends. American spies are good guys and Russian spies are bad guys," was my less than creative response. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. I kind of feel sorry for John Honeyman."

John Honeyman? John Honeyman? I racked my brain trying to remember the name. Was he associated with Pollard?

Accepting my ignorance, I asked him who John Honeyman was.

"He was a spy for George Washington. I read about him in Social Studies. You don't know about John Honeyman?"

One more disillusionment. Last month my son discovered I had a lousy outside jump shot. Now he was faced with the realization that I was not all knowing. I promised myself that I would secretly practice my jump shot and read more American history. His details on Honeyman were sketchy at best. He recalled that Honeyman was a farmer who posed as a British sympathizer but actually passed secrets to General George Washington. Though scorned by his neighbors and threatened with prison, he never told anyone about his true role.

My son wasn't nervous about the game. He's never nervous. We (I like to think I'm part of the team) won the game by 15 points. I'm the one who is

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always nervous. My son fouled out in the last quarter so I had time to think about spies. I would look up Honeyman the following Monday in the Agency library.

In addition to the Agency library, I checked the Fairfax public library. I found very little on the man, perhaps because no one had ever bothered to write a novel or make a mini series on him. What I did learn, however, I found interesting, and I thought it should be shared with other intel officers. Honeyman was obviously very courageous. I was even more impressed with the fact that he operated effectively for seven years under deep cover, used excellent tradecraft, provided timely and important intelligence, and never admitted he was an intelligence operative even after the Revolutionary War was over. Nathan Hale failed in his first mission, yet his name is nearly a household word and we even have a statue of him near the CIA front entrance. Honeyman is merely a footnote in the history books, yet his reporting may have been responsible for America's first major victory of the war.

### The Immigrant

Remember the painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River in the dead of winter? There he stands resolutely in the prow of his boat, surrounded by chunks of floating ice. Pretty inspiring, isn't it? The crossing of the Delaware and the Continental Army's brilliant surprise attack on Trenton changed the course of the war. It was an extremely courageous maneuver which, had it failed, could have doomed Washington's fledgling army. It was a calculated risk and a successful one. A good commander, however, usually bases calculated risks on good intelligence, and this is where John Honeyman enters the picture.

Honeyman, a brawny Scotch-Irish immigrant, had come to this country as a British conscript during the French and Indian War. Discharged in 1763, he decided to stay, became an apprentice weaver, and married an Irish-born Philadelphia girl. Life was good to Honeyman. He prospered and by 1775 was living comfortably in Philadelphia with his wife Mary and his four children, including a crippled daughter named Jane. As the winds of war began to blow, the Irish side of Honeyman rose to the surface. Hatred of the British, and affection for his adopted country, drove him toward a fateful decision. At 46 years of age, perhaps too old to bear a musket for his country, he thought he could make an even more valuable contribution, in another way.

In 1775, the Continental Congress named George Washington to lead the colonial forces. Honeyman gained an audience with the General. Turning on a remembered Scottish burr, he explained to Washington that he could easily pass as a fervent and loyal Scottish Tory. He could gain the confidence of the British and act as a spy for them, but in reality spy for Washington as a double agent. Washington thought Honeyman's proposal had merit but as a weaver Honeyman would have limited mobility and very little access. He would need a more effective cover. It was decided Honeyman should become a cattle dealer and butcher, of which he had a great deal of experience back in Ireland. In supplying provisions to the enemy, Honeyman would have constant access to the British and Hessian lines. A scenario was worked out for a cover for

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action. Washington said he could easily get word to Honeyman when he needed to meet with him. Whenever Honeyman had any important information, he should allow himself to be captured by Continental sentries. To insure that the capture appeared realistic, Honeyman said he would put up a struggle. When Honeyman was subsequently brought in for interrogation, he was usually the worse for wear.

Shortly before the Revolution began, Honeyman moved his family to the village of Griggstown, New Jersey, a few miles north of Princeton and a center for Loyalist activity. He began his new occupation and soon was providing some of Lord Cornwallis' British and Hessian troops with beef. His 1763 honorable discharge papers from the British army lent some bona fides to his Tory cover.

By November 1776, four months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Continental army was in disarray. It had been chased across the states of New York and New Jersey and had lost nearly 3,000 men at Fort Washington. The army was in full retreat and down to a few thousand starving, demoralized, and ragged soldiers. Washington, attempting to save what was left of his army, sought safety across the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. Washington sent word to Honeyman and a hurried clandestine meeting was set up outside of Hackensack, New Jersey. Washington told Honeyman to mingle with the British army, gather information, and contact him when he had something of significance.

The afternoon of 22 December, a dejected General George Washington sat in Keith's Pennsylvania farmhouse, a few miles south of the Delaware. His army was slowly dissolving from the daily desertions. Washington was certain that across the river, Lord Cornwallis' warm and well fed soldiers were probably building boats and would soon come across in force to finish off his remaining troops. One of Washington's letters to his brother, John Augustine, reveals some of the depression he was experiencing as he viewed the end of the short-lived Revolution: "I think the game is pretty near up. No man, I believe, ever had a greater choice of difficulties and less means to extricate himself from them."

### **The Intelligence**

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Two of his sentries dragged in a beaten and disheveled "spy" who had been caught near the army's perimeter. Washington gave a curt order for them to wait outside the door until he completed a personal interrogation of the spy. As the door closed, the spy straightened up, dusted off his jacket and offered his hand to the General in greeting. General Washington grasped the hand of his best of all possible Christmas presents, his spy John Honeyman.

Honeyman offered a detailed description of the British troops in New Jersey. Posing as a friendly Tory, Honeyman had gained full access to their lines and, during conversations around campfires, learned a great deal about the disposition of the British army. Certain that Washington's army had been effectively destroyed, the British had not yet bothered to build boats to ferry their troops across the Delaware. They would enjoy the Christmas holidays in bivouac and then mop up the remnants of the ragtag army in due course.

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Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rall, the commander of the mercenary Hessian troops, had secured Trenton for the British. Rall had such contempt for Washington's rebel troops that he had not even bothered to erect breastworks around the village. In addition, Honeyman had learned that the homesick Germans were planning a gala Christmas feast and few, if any, sentries would be posted. The normally grave General Washington allowed himself a smile and patted Honeyman on the shoulder. The single moment all great commanders dream about had arrived. He would crush the Hessians at Trenton and, along with captured supplies, give his army a needed boost to their morale.

At the end of Honeyman's report, the General again assumed the pose of the stern interrogator. He called for a sentry and instructed him to lock Honeyman in the guardhouse for a court martial the next morning. Later that evening, a haystack outside the farmhouse caught fire. As the guardhouse sentry ran to help put out the fire, Honeyman's locked door was mysteriously unlocked and Honeyman ran unseen for the woods. He was able to cross part of the Delaware River on the ice but had to wade and swim through most of the frigid water. He then ran on to the Hessian lines where he fell shivering and exhausted. Taken to Colonel Rall's quarters, he described his capture by Continental troops and his subsequent escape. He told Rall that Washington's army was disorganized and totally incapacitated. He added they were on the verge of mutiny and would not last the winter. Though Rall needed little encouragement, he decided to proceed with his Christmas party and pulled his sentries in for the celebration.

Across the river, Washington made his preparations. He sent a message to his commanders: "Christmas day at night, one hour before day, is the time fixed for our attempt on Trenton." All troops were instructed to prepare and keep on hand three days' rations of whatever cooked food they could find. Scribbling on a scrap of paper, Washington devised his famous watchword for the march on Trenton, "Victory or Death."

As Rall and his Hessians ate and drank far into the night, Washington and his troops, many barefoot and dressed in rags, silently ferried themselves across the ice-choked Delaware River. (Remember the painting?) Shortly before dawn on Christmas day, as the Hessians slept off their 'Frohliche Weinachten' hangovers, two columns of Continental troops marched through the sleet and stormed into the pages of history. The village of Trenton was taken in less than an hour. One hundred and six Hessian mercenaries were killed or wounded, including Rall who was shot while attempting to rally his groggy troops. Of the patriots, only four men were wounded. More than 900 Hessians were captured and ferried across the river. They later were paraded through the streets of Philadelphia, proof that the Revolution was still very much alive.

#### The Cost of Cover

It was America's first major victory of the war. A startled Cornwallis attempted to rush troops to block Washington, but the wily General slipped around his flank and, in the dark, destroyed Cornwallis' rear guard in the Battle of Princeton. The attack on Trenton would change the complexion of the war. As Washington's now spirited troops hurried back to safety in the New Jersey

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hills, Honeyman slipped back home. There was no hero's welcome. His house was surrounded by a crowd of patriots who threatened to burn the Tory's place down. As the crowd shouted abuse and threats, Mary Honeyman, with her children fearfully huddled behind her, denied he was there or that she knew where he was. Cooler heads prevailed that evening and the crowd left, muttering dire warnings about what would happen to Tory sympathizers. Mary Honeyman was the only person, outside of Washington and a few of the General's trusted advisers, who knew of her husband's double-agent role. She watched the crowd disperse before unlatching the cellar door to allow John to disappear into the winter night.

Honeyman, unable to return home after Trenton, lived a lonely existence for the rest of the war. In 1778, he was captured and indicted by the colonial government of New Jersey for high treason, punishable with death, and locked in the Trenton jail. Fifteen days after his arrest, a leading patriot, Jacob Hyer, a colonel in the New Jersey militia, quietly paid his bail. When Honeyman came up for trial he was just as quietly released. Later that year, he was again indicted for aiding and comforting the enemy and again, charges were quietly but quickly dropped. The commander of the Continental Army had made sure that his favorite secret agent would be protected.

A letter written by Washington that year to the Governor of New Jersey, William Livingston, described the esteem the General held for the dangerous and thankless job of a secret agent.

"You must be well convinced that it is indispensably necessary to make use of these means to procure intelligence. The persons employed must bear the suspicion of being thought inimical: and it is not in their power to assert their innocence, because that would get abroad and destroy the confidence which the enemy puts in them."

Peace came to the colonies in 1783 and Honeyman returned home to stay. The family continued to be scorned by friends and neighbors alike. Life in the new United States had become extremely difficult for Tory sympathizers and most had emigrated to England or Canada. One day as his daughter Jane, a quiet and sensitive teenager, sat on the front porch she saw a crowd of neighbors and soldiers come down the road. She was certain the time had finally come when her father would be imprisoned and the family driven off into exile. The mounted party of Continental officers appeared especially dashing in their blue uniforms with their clanking swords. They were led by a tall, white-haired man riding a spirited white stallion. The crowd of neighbors, rather than displaying the raucous behavior of an angry mob, seemed subdued, almost respectful. As they turned into the yard, the man in the lead dismounted and Jane gasped in surprise. General George Washington gravely walked up the porch stairs and, upon seeing John Honeyman, reached out and grasped both of Honeyman's hands. As Honeyman's neighbors looked on, Washington thanked him for the service he had provided his country. As Washington rode off into the distance, the neighbors crowded around Honeyman. The distrust and hate disappeared and for the first time in years, Jane and her family could hold their heads high.

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John Honeyman lived to the age of 93 and became a prosperous farmer in the neighboring village of Lamington. He had a total of five sons and two daughters. Honeyman continued to keep silent about his war service and never discussed it with either his children or neighbors. Perhaps Honeyman's exploits would have been lost to posterity except for his grandson, Justice John Van Dyke of the New Jersey Supreme Court, and a noted New Jersey historian, William S. Stryker. Van Dyke had spent a great deal of his youth with his grandfather, working the farm and sharing winter nights around the fireplace. He never dreamed the gentle, dignified old man had at one time been a secret agent during the Revolutionary War. He learned the full story from his Aunt Jane who came to live with the Van Dyke family after Honeyman died.

In 1873, after compiling as many facts as he could about Honeyman, he wrote a short historical piece for a New Jersey periodical. Stryker, who was president of the New Jersey Historical Society, became interested and conducted his own investigation. Both of these men, digging through the records of a colonial village family and interviewing area survivors, were able to document a more complete and fascinating exploit of early American espionage. A young patriot who was privy to Honeyman's services told Van Dyke during an early interview that Honeyman had "done more for the cause than many who are shining heroes today."

Outside of New Jersey, little is known of Honeyman. He is buried in the old village cemetery at Lamington and next to his eroded headstone a Revolutionary War veteran marker has been placed. On the New Jersey side of the Delaware river at Washington Crossing State Park, where Washington landed for his march on Trenton, a stone memorial fountain with a bronze plaque on it has been erected by the Patriotic Order of the Sons of America. It reads:

**Dedicated in Memory of  
John Honeyman  
Who Served Washington and  
the Continental Army  
as a Spy**

*Drink of the Fount of Liberty  
Let Posterity Inherit Freedom*

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